DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 322 CG 016 916

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TITLE Spouse Abuse: How Family Power is Shared.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (29th, Atlanta, GA, March 23-36, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Blacks; College Students; Decision Making; *Family Structure; Higher Education; *Power Structure; *Racial Factors; Sex Differences; *Socioeconomic Status; Whites
IDENTIFIERS *Spouse Abuse

ABSTRACT

Although spouse abuse is a common occurrence it rarely results in prosecution; among the reasons for the low prosecution rate is the disproportionate degree of power in the marital relationship. To look at instances of spouse abuse in black and white families, and to examine the distribution of decision making influence in these homes, 366 undergraduate students completed two questionnaires assessing spouse abuse and the distribution of marital power. Of the 366 volunteers 129 were males, 237 were females; 318 were white, 45 were black or other; 189 were from lower status homes, 197 were from middle class status homes. Results of statistical analyses showed that 33 percent of the students reported some instances of parental spouse abuse during a typical year while they were growing up. Perception of family power was significantly influenced by students' sex, race, and socioeconomic status. Overall, the results showed equally wide ranges of spouse abuse and social status, with differences in violence not explained by race or social status. (WAS)

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SPOUSE ABUSE: HOW FAMILY POWER IS SHARED

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CG 016916

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA, March 23-26, 1983.

Spouse Abuse: How Family Power is Shared

Introduction:

On October 27, 1982 the Surgeon General of the United States anncunced that spouse and child abuse are the nation's number one health problems. Few would argue the gravity of the problem. One estimate is that spouse abuse occurs once every 30 seconds (Richter, Note 1) while a second estimate is one occurance every 18 seconds (Donahue, Note 2). Although spouse abuse is a common occurance it rarely results in prosecution. Field and Field (1973) investigated 7500 instances of spouse abuse in Washington D.C. and found fewer than 200 resulted in prosecution and far fewer ended in conviction.

Among the reasons that the prosecution rate is so low is that the family is embarassed by the abuse which they regard as something which only happens to others. A second reason may be that the abusive spouse controls a disproportionate degree of power in the marital relationship (Gelles, 1976). Finally family members may feel compelled to hide the abuse to protect the emotionally immature abusive man (Davidson, 1978). Such a man may have very little power in the marriage and may lash out as his only source of influence and control.

For whatever reason it is clear that spouse abuse provides major devastation in American society and continues to be hidden from public scrutiny. The present study is an attempt to look at instances of spouse abuse in black and white families and to examine the distribution of decision making influence in these homes.

Method:

Subjects were students from undergraduate psychology classes at Middle Tennessee State University. There were 366 subjects who volunteered for the study. Of these 129 were males, while 237 were females. There were

318 whites and 45 blacks (three were designated as other and were grouped with the blacks for purposes of statistical analysis). Socioeconomic status was divided into two groups, "lower status" and "middle class status." There were 189 lower status and 197 middle class status subjects.

Materials included Straus' (1974) Conflict Resolution Technique to measure spouse abuse and Bowerman, Gecas, and Bahr's (1974) questionnaire to assess power in the marriage.

Results:

Of the total subjects 33% indicated some instances of spouse abuse during "a typical year while they were growing up." A t test compared the distribution of power in spouse abuse vs. abuse free families. While the abusive homes reflected a mother centered distribution of power, the nonabusive homes were almost exactly egalitarian. Differences were significant at the .005 level.

Analyses of variance were conducted to determine the influence of race, sex, and socioeconomic status on perceived power distribution as well as on family violence. Perception of family power was significantly influenced by the sex, race, and socioeconomic status of the respondent. While males viewed their families as being relatively father controlled, females reported that their families decisions were dominated by their mothers ($p < .001$). Lower socioeconomic status and black respondents viewed their families as relatively mother dominated while middle status and white subjects viewed their families as egalitarian Figure 1 shows the perceived power for each sex x race x socioeconomic status group.

When "mother's use of reasoning to solve conflicts" was the dependent variable, socioeconomic status of the respondents was signficant ($p < .05$). Middle status subjects reported that their mother's used more reasoning. There

was also a sex by race interaction; ie., male-whites reported the highest mother reasoning scores followed by female-blacks, female-whites, and male-blacks.

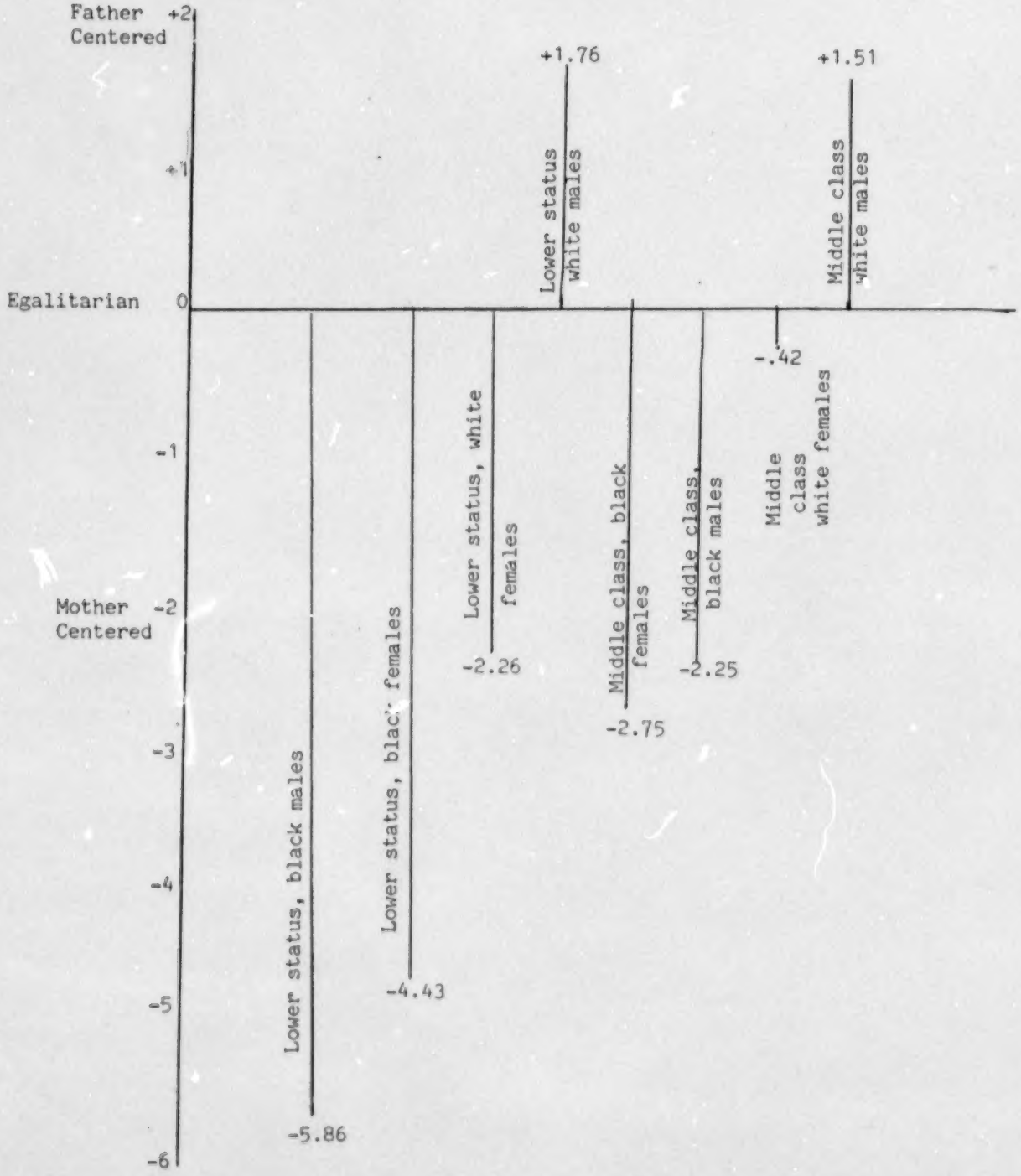
When "mothers use of verbal aggression" and "mothers acting out" were measured there were significant effects for race. White subjects reported that their mothers used more verbal aggression ($p < .01$), and more acting out ($p = .05$). Additional analyses are currently being planned.

Discussion:

What then has the study taught us? Since one-third of this group of college students recalls spouse abuse as being characteristic of a typical year in their childhood, spouse abuse is clearly a common problem. Perhaps most importantly the study serves to underscore the often repeated statement that spouse abuse knows no racial or social status lines. There was a wide range of instances of spouse abuse. There was an equally wide range of social status represented in the study. Yet no differences in violence were explained by race or by social status. The middle class needs to be aware that spouse abuse happens everywhere. The children are aware of it and are willing to record it on questionnaires like these. Perhaps parent awareness and a resolve to deal with the issue are not far behind.

Distribution of Power

Figure 1



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